

Instructions and Guidance for Completing the Web Inventory

August 19, 2011

Instructions

Agency CIOs must include key internal stakeholders, including the Agency Web Director, New Media Director (where applicable), Director of Public Affairs, and other staff responsible for managing Agency web resources, in completing the web inventory.

Although the inventory surveys are not due until October 11, Agencies are encouraged to complete them sooner to allow time to analyze results. These results should be incorporated into the Web Improvement Plan that must be posted on Agency Open Government pages by October 11, 2011.

A high level summary of the inventory results will be made publicly available on the .gov Reform Initiative website at: <http://www.usa.gov/webreform>.

The Web Inventory includes two surveys:

- **Survey 1: Individual Domain Survey: (due Oct. 11, 2011 but recommend completion earlier)**
 - [Access the survey](#) via the .gov Reform Initiative page on the MAX website.
 - Agency CIOs are responsible for ensuring the survey is completed for EACH domain the agency owns, as listed on the .gov dataset on [Data.gov as of August 12, 2011](#). For example, if your agency owns 70 domains, you must complete a separate survey for each domain (70 total).
 - The survey includes 20 questions and is expected to take approximately 15-20 minutes to complete for each domain.
 - Agencies can view results of their individual domain surveys on the MAX website beginning August 19.
- **Survey 2: Agency Web Governance Survey: (due Oct. 11, 2011 but recommend completion earlier)**
 - Agencies should complete the Web Governance Survey AFTER completing the individual domain survey above as these results will be needed to answer questions about the Agency's overall web governance.

Definitions

- **Domain:** A domain is a registered name on the Internet. It allows an agency with that domain to have exclusive rights to that name so it can't be used by another entity. In the Domain Name System hierarchy, ".gov" is considered a top-level domain (along with .com, .org, etc) A second-level domain is a domain that is directly below a top-level domain. For example, in epa.gov, "epa" is the second-level domain of the ".gov" top-level domain. A single domain may contain multiple, sub-domains as part of its hierarchy (for example, [jpl.nasa.gov](#) and [nssc.nasa.gov](#) are sub-domains of [nasa.gov](#)). These sub-domains are sometimes also referred to as "microsites."

- **Website:** A website is the domain name plus the hosted content. A website is considered unique if it's managed independently and has its own design, navigation, or infrastructure. For example, www.justice.gov is its own website, but it also contains multiple websites underneath, such as oip.justice.gov and justice.gov/dea.

As noted above, agencies are only required to complete the individual domain survey for second-level .gov domains listed on Data.gov (such as hhs.gov, state.gov). However, since one domain can contain multiple websites, we want to capture that information in the inventory, without posing an undue burden. As such, Agencies should provide a list of all unique websites they own. We may ask for detailed information about these individual websites as part of a later survey.

Guidance

This inventory is designed to be an Agency self-assessment of the value of each .gov domain the Agency manages. This self-assessment/review should help Agencies decide what action to take—whether to maintain the domain/site in its current state, merge it with another site, or archive and eliminate it.

As Agencies assess each domain and opportunities for consolidating resources, they should consider the following factors developed by the .gov Reform Task Force:

A) Understand the cost and impact of having separate .gov domains

Over the years, federal agencies have increasingly built new, stand-alone websites for specific, priority initiatives. However, this is not efficient for the following reasons:

- **Upfront costs:** Separate domains—when independently managed--incur significant costs that can include:
 - Web publishing or other software, such as content management systems
 - Design costs, if the domain has its own design
 - Developers
 - Web hosting and disaster recovery
 - Cybersecurity
 - Search and web analytic tools
 - Section 508 testing and compliance (to ensure access for people with disabilities)
 - Staff time to maintain and update separate web policies and procedures
 - Training people on separate systems
- **Maintenance costs** – Once the site launches, maintenance costs, such as content management system license fees, server hosting fees, design upgrades, etc. will be incurred. Stand-alone domains can cost hundreds of thousands or millions of dollars to maintain. Although migrating a stand-alone website to another domain requires an initial investment, consolidating infrastructure and operations can provide significant long-term cost savings.
- **Federal Website Requirements:** Maintaining multiple .gov domains requires that each domain comply with federal requirements and best practices. See the full list of federal web requirements and best practices at: www.howto.gov/web-content/requirements-and-best-practices/checklists/long.
- **Customer experience:** Spreading content spread across dozens or hundreds of websites makes it more difficult for users—and search engines—to find the authoritative source or the most recently updated content.
- **Search rankings:** A significant portion of traffic to most websites now comes directly from search engines. To leverage being found on search engines, Agencies should house content on existing websites, especially those sites that already have a high volume of visitors and high search ranking, to take advantage of that traffic. Setting up a new domain may actually hinder the “findability” of separate content because it can take weeks or months to build up status on search engines.

B) Use metrics to determine the value of each .gov domain

Agencies should reference web metrics when completing their reviews:

- How much visitor traffic is the site generating? Could more people access the content if it was housed on another site that is already generating a high volume of traffic?
- What is the user performance? How well can people accomplish their top tasks on this site (not just starting at your site, but also from a commercial search engine)? Is user performance improving, declining, or staying steady? Are you measuring task completion rates, time to complete tasks, other user performance metrics?
- Is the site fulfilling its intended purpose and reaching its intended audience? What metrics do you have to demonstrate that?
- What is the level of customer satisfaction with the site? Is satisfaction increasing or decreasing?
- Does the value of delivering the content (volume of visitors + performance) exceed the cost of maintaining the site?

C) Consolidate program-specific content into broader domains

If Agencies have a specialized program or initiative, use an existing domain that has a broader scope to house that content, rather than set up a stand-alone domain.

D) Follow preliminary guidance on interagency content and redirects

The .gov Reform Task Force is developing criteria for interagency web content and for redirects to determine under which circumstances separate .gov domains should be used. In the interim, Agencies should follow this preliminary guidance:

- **Interagency content:**

- In most cases, a primary agency should be designated to host interagency content (i.e. www.ed.gov/early-learning) and should use clear language on the site to indicate that it is a partnership among multiple agencies.
- Agencies that manage an interagency domain name are responsible for being the definitive, authoritative source for that topic across government. The Agency managing the site must have the capacity to broadly cover that entire topic (i.e. “volunteer” or “jobs”) and collaborate with Agencies across government to ensure their content and services are represented on the interagency site.
- Agencies should coordinate web efforts not just within their Agency but also across Agencies. To facilitate this process, Agencies should review all federal executive branch .gov domains that relate to your agency’s mission area, search for topics on search engines, and identify similar content on other existing sites. Do other Agencies manage sites that deliver content similar to one of your site(s)? If so, coordinate with the [web manager](#) from that agency to discuss how to consolidate resources and eliminate duplication.

- **Redirects:**

Redirects are domains that point to another domain. They are typically used to:

- Point users from an old domain to a new domain when there has been a name change (i.e. – redirecting users from firstgov.gov to usa.gov)
- Market a program by using an easy-to-remember “vanity URL” (i.e. earthday.gov redirects to epa.gov/earthday)

- Point users to the correct site if they type in a misspelling or variation (i.e. chewsmypate.gov redirects to choosemypate.gov).
- To determine whether to keep a current .gov redirect, Agencies should review their log files to see if the URL is generating sufficient traffic to the intended site. For example, GSA recently deleted redirects for .gov domains that produced less than 300 referrals annually. However, GSA kept redirects such as “firstgov.gov,” a legacy domain that refers hundreds of thousands of users annually to the current domain, USA.gov.
- When using a redirect to market an individual program, consider the scope and visibility of the program, the investment you’re making in promoting that brand, and the impact it will have on the larger, parent brand(s). Multiple redirect domains may dilute the primary brand you’re trying to promote, and marketing multiple domains can sometimes confuse your message.

E) Archive domains before they are eliminated

During the inventory, Agencies will identify domains that should be eliminated because they are outdated, obsolete, or redundant with an existing site.

- Agencies should archive any site before it is taken offline so that it can be digitally preserved and meet federal records requirements.
- The .gov Reform Task Force is collaborating with the National Archives and Records Administration and the Library of Congress to develop guidelines and a central process for archiving sites to ensure consistency across agencies and will provide more details soon.